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Epistolarity: Life after Death of the Letter?

Liz Stanley and Margaretta Jolly

Liz: We have both written about changing attitudes towards epistolary forms of communication, including those proclaiming the “death of the letter.”¹ We broadly agree that, although “the letter,” in narrow terms, is in rapid decline almost everywhere, epistolarity is alive and flourishing in text, email, and social media of different kinds. In South Africa where I work, for instance, the cell phone and the functional forms of literacy supported by text and SMS have produced a vast upsurge in epistolary communications in a way that paper and post have never achieved. This parallels what has been happening in the European context too. As another fan of everyday life writing, what do you make of this?

Margaretta: I agree. The concept of epistolarity must encompass the thriving modes of textual communication released by digital technology and welcome its democratizing elements. Yet the persistent lament over the “death of the letter” is symptomatic of legitimate anxieties about trust and identity in a world of reproducible, anonymous, globally reachable text.² It is easy for literary critics to pull ideas of authorship, authenticity, and originality apart in print culture, but these arguments need retuning where digital technology has already undone them. When we earlier took the temperature of epistolarity as a genre in our essay “Letters as/Not a Genre,” we concluded that letters were proto-genres whose malleable features are best understood through historically variable codes of relationship, and so the “epistolary pact” is never generalizable in the way the autobiographical pact is. But what is happening to its “gift” exchange and what you have called its “I and You” character, when social media has opened up the one to the many?³

Liz: Perhaps you see the e-epistolary pact as rather in shreds, while I see continuities as well as changes. Although email often parallels the conventions of letters, certainly many other e-communications have taken on more of the I than the You; and while there is an emergent ethics, there is uncertainty about appropriate codes. But the I|You relationship is still there, the separations of space and time continue, and the ethics of exchange remain important, albeit shaky. Perhaps when academics puzzle about these changes we are motivated by fear that digital communications won’t be accessible in

CONTACT Liz Stanley  liz.stanley@ed.au.uk; Margaretta Jolly  m.jolly@sussex.ac.uk

the same way as the paper equivalents! However, many people already keep their e-communications, professional archivists among others now capture much web activity, and ISPs [Internet service providers] and corporations like Google already make some of this data available, even if at a price.

Margaretta: Certainly what happens to digital communications *after* being sent will become increasingly important to epistolary scholars, and we need to learn how to access them on our own terms.⁴ Again, some anxiety is justified when almost every digital communication has already been scraped, crawled, surveyed, or commodified. One answer is to build on the history of epistolary editing, but beginning from the premise that it is never possible fully to capture the totality of any community of correspondences, even in the digital era. I'd like to turn here to your work on the Schreiner epistolarium and Whites Writing Whiteness [WWW] as examples.⁵ These involve digitizing large dispersed collections of letters, and also finding ways to interpret them conceptually that focus on the unsaid and lost as well as the saved and said. Could you comment on your approach, which has turned what many had ignored as just trivial family letters into relevant narratives for today?

Liz: As well as theorization of the epistolarium, this raises issues about big data.⁶ I haven't aligned myself with digital humanities projects here, but used social science frameworks in working with the five thousand Schreiner letters and tens of thousands in the WWW project, coupled with the technical expertise of HRI [Humanities Research Institute] Online at the University of Sheffield. Obviously, I don't have any objections to humanities' ways of doing things! However, two broad trends in this have not really suited my approach, because they are concerned with replicating the image in digital form and, more recently, with using techniques such as R programming to look at data sets in total. In contrast, I want to combine the very small with the very big in providing in-depth, close readings of individual texts, while also using quantitative techniques to gain purchase on overall patterns and contexts.⁷ So, I have connected more with history projects such as the work of Donna Gabaccia and Sonia Cancian on immigrant letters.⁸ But what remains elusive here is the backwards-and-forwards analytical movement between the big and the little to underpin interpretation that drives my own work.

Margaretta: Your insistence that we keep qualitative alongside quantitative is surely right, as you show with close readings of seemingly simple or even semi-literate letters to bring out the relationships of race, class, and gender at critical moments in South African history.⁹ And perhaps we can think about how to combine close and distant reading methods as we capture, analyze, and re-present today's e-epistles, as Gillian Whitlock is doing for asylum-seeker cyber-communications. But how do you relate this to changes in these relationships across time and space? And can this be made meaningful to contemporary South African publics?

Liz: My emphasis has been on recording and analyzing letters and correspondences in figurational groupings from the 1770s to the 1970s, leading to

an engagement with Norbert Elias's work. Taking cross sections—a few letters here, a small set of letters there—doesn't provide the temporal reach needed to establish whether representational matters have indeed changed, or whether it's more a matter of different people writing in different ways. But, for instance, the letters of London Missionary Society missionaries in southern Africa run continuously for this period, enabling patterns of change or stasis in organizational discourse regarding ethnicity and race to be traced over time. As Elias emphasizes, tracking such figurations over the long term is analytically crucial. Digital technology makes this possible, for these collections are so humongous that data management and analysis is dependent on the capacities such technology provides. Both projects have large numbers of users and readers from South Africa as well as elsewhere. The liberal and radical circles Schreiner moved in involved many members of the then emergent black intelligentsia, and her social analysis was deeply concerned with race and racism; and the white people who are the object of WWW research were a tiny minority engaging with large, vibrant black populations, as I note in "Whites Writing." These projects have in-built links with the political and social contexts of South Africa and its diverse publics.

Margaretta: So the digital humanities need anthropological and sociological methodologies and ideas, as well as vice versa. What Elias might do with Twitter, for example, is fascinating to contemplate—doubtless a decline in the kind of civility he observed in the industrial/print age, and one which calls for further work on a manageable ethics for proliferating online intimate publics. But these questions can seem to paralyze ideas of the epistolary "self" in any traditional sense.

Liz: Well, surely "self" has never been like this, outside the closures operated through the stasis of the text! However, let's end with the question of art—something debated in our 2006 correspondence as a still-important element of epistolarity. If nothing else, the rise of digitally provided forms demonstrates an innovative artfulness in how people are using these. And not all of these uses are confined to I|You exchanges, are they?

Margaretta: The psychology of writing, upon which epistolary creativity depends, has been reinvigorated by today's textualization of sociality, and our "selfie" culture can be viewed as a resource in this respect, as I suggest in "The Art of Relationship in Letters." I've also been cheered by what Kathy Mills terms the new "sensory literacies" as they reinvent a fascinating aspect of postal letters—their fetishizability as traces of another's presence. I recently filed an e-card in which my late aunt sings to me. ... But let me close with Clare Brant's example of the MECO [Main Engine Cutoff] cards, prepared by astronauts to be given to loved ones once in orbit, communicating "everything is fine." For Brant, these prove we are ultimately "human, not cyborgs."¹⁰ However, they also suggest the post-digital age, one where the

very taken-for-grantedness of the digital returns us to the material, and where the personal pleasure of the letter continues in the obviously new.

Chorus: As do these exchanges of “Liz” and “Margaretta” as communicative artifices. “The letter” might be dying, but we agree that it’s “long live epistolarity!”

The University of Edinburgh

The University of Sussex

Notes

1. Jolly, “Introduction”; Stanley, “Death.”
2. Jolly, “Lamenting.”
3. Stanley, “Shadows”; Stanley et al.
4. Jolly, “Burning.”
5. See <<https://www.oliveschreiner.org/>>; <www.whiteswritingwhiteness.ed.ac.uk>.
6. Stanley, “Epistolarium”; “Gift”; “Settler.”
7. Stanley, “Documents”; “Operationalizing.”
8. See <<http://archives.ihrc.umn.edu/>>.
9. See <www.whiteswritingwhiteness.ed.ac.uk/Traces>.
10. Brant 19.

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